

Vocabulary Learning Strategies 語彙学習戦略

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Abstract: The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been recently recognized by theorists and researchers in the field. This article aims to provide a digest of recent research on vocabulary learning strategies specifically in the English as a foreign language context in Japan. In Japan where there is minimal exposure to English in daily life and where word knowledge is often tested, teachers should be informing learners about vocabulary learning strategies and learners should be using them to their advantage.

Keywords: Vocabulary, learning strategies, Vocabulary learning strategies, rote-learning, Japanese students

要約: 第二言語習得及び外国語習得における語彙知識の大きな役割が近年、理論家や研究者によって認識されて来ている。本稿は、とりわけ日本における、外国語としての英語の語彙学習戦略についての近年の研究を概観する。日常生活において英語に触れる機会が少ない日本では、語彙知識が試験で問われる事が多く、教師は語彙学習戦略についての情報を与え学習者はそれを生かすべきである。

キーワード: 語彙、学習戦略、語彙学習戦略、丸暗記、日本人学生

The prominent role of vocabulary knowledge in second or foreign language learning has been recently recognized by theorists and researchers in the field. One of the most important challenges that learners will face during the process of second language learning is acquiring new vocabulary. Insufficient vocabulary can lead to difficulties in second language learning, therefore, students need to be informed of various vocabulary learning strategies. It has been suggested that teaching vocabulary should not only consist of teaching specific words but also aim at equipping learners with the necessary strategies to expand their vocabulary knowledge. This article aims to provide a digest of recent research on vocabulary learning strategies specifically in the English as a foreign language context in Japan.

A Review of the Literature

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are a subset of language learning strategies. When particular approaches are used by second language learners for the acquisition of

new words in the second language they are called ‘vocabulary learning strategies’ (Gu, 1994). Classifications of VLS are controversial. Schmitt’s taxonomy will be used to present the different VLS. Schmitt (1997) took advantage of Rebecca Oxford’s (1990) classification of learning strategies containing memory strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, social strategies and the discover/consolidation distinctions suggested by Cook and Mayer to propose an extensive taxonomy of VLS.

The role of vocabulary learning has been recognized by researchers in the field. It has also been asserted that the vocabulary learning strategies students use have a great impact on the success of their vocabulary learning (Oxford, 1990; Nation, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). Language learning strategies, however, have created a great deal of controversy over the years since Rubin and Stern first introduced the concept (1975). All of these studies focused on identifying lists of strategies. In the eighties the emphasis moved to that of classification. Rubin (1981) classified strategies according to whether they were direct or indirect. In 1985 O'Malley et al. divided strategies into cognitive, metacognitive or social categories. In 1990, Rebecca Oxford published "Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know" which included the "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" also known as the "SILL". The SILL was based on her strategy taxonomy and consisted of six scales. Learning strategies are divided by Oxford into direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies involve memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies, on the other hand, involve metacognitive, social and affective strategies; however, some issues have been raised in the literature regarding Oxford's classification system. First, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) argue that Oxford's inventory has no cognitive-theoretical foundation and includes overlapping sub-categories. While Dornyei (2005) notes that the same problems hold in the wide area of VLS.

There has been much debate in the literature surrounding definitions and Macaro, (2006) gave up trying to define the concept in favor of listing essential characteristics. Others such as Dornyei and Skehan, (2003) abandoned the strategy term preferring what they call self regulation. Griffiths (2008) explained that language learning strategies are activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own learning. Griffiths also demonstrated and showed a correlation between language learning strategy use and English proficiency. Oxford and Cohen (2011) have both published new books on the subject of VLS.

Some important studies on VLS include Ahmed (1989), Porte (1998), Sanaoui (1995) Moir (1996). Sanaoui (1995) identified two distinctive approaches to vocabulary learning by adult learners, discovering that there were students who structured their vocabulary learning and others that did not. Gu and Johnson (1996) identified six strategies for vocabulary acquisition; - guessing, dictionary, note-taking, rehearsal, encoding and activation. Lawson and Hogben (1996) distinguish four categories of strategies: repetition, word feature analysis, simple elaboration and complex elaboration. Schmitt (1997) in a study focusing on the vocabulary learning strategies in the Japanese context formed a taxonomy adopted from Oxford (1990). He modified Oxford's (1990) taxonomy in that he made a distinction between discovery and consolidation strategies. Nation (2001) also proposed a different theoretically-oriented taxonomy. Nielsen (2003) makes a distinction between contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary learning strategies. Oxford, most recently stated that learning strategies are an integral part of self-regulated learning (2011).

Some studies of vocabulary learning strategies in the Japanese context include: Schmitt (1997), who used an early version of his taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies as a research instrument. The study was centered on finding answers as to which strategies Japanese students used and which they considered helpful even if they did not use them. Kudo (1999) aimed to describe the VLS exploited by Japanese senior high school students. Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2003) examined the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and students TOEIC scores. Takeuchi, O., Griffiths, C., & Coyle, D. (2007) also conducted a study in the Japanese context. Mizumoto and Takeuchi's (2009) study examined the effectiveness of explicit instruction of VLS over a ten week semester with a group of 146 female EFL learners from two Japanese universities.

Other studies of VLS show that strategy use can accelerate foreign language learning. There have been suggestions that one way to accelerate the learning of a second or a foreign language is to teach learners how to learn more efficiently and effectively. Teachers are recommended to train their students in different learning strategies. Learning strategies instruction can help 'EFL learners become better learners. In addition, skill in using learning strategies assists students in becoming independent, confident learners' (Chamot, 1999, p.1). Research on language learning strategies has demonstrated that there is a relationship between strategy use and success in second or foreign language learning. Cohen and Aphek (1981, cited in Chamot, 2001) taught

students of Hebrew to remember vocabulary items by making paired mnemonic associations and found that those who made associations remembered vocabulary more effectively than those who did not. Sanaoui (1995) carried out a study to demonstrate the relationship between vocabulary strategies use and success in acquiring and retaining vocabulary items. The study showed that adult learners of L2 vocabulary were likely to fall into two categories: those who adopted a structured approach to their learning and those who did not. Learners in the first group took control of their vocabulary learning. They did not merely rely on what the language course provided, but used their own initiative in regularly creating opportunities for vocabulary learning, by listening to the radio, watching movies, reading and using self-study. They kept systematic records of the vocabulary they learned by using vocabulary notebooks and lists. They reviewed what they had done several times a week, while the learners in the second group who followed the unstructured approach relied mainly on course material. Sanaoui concluded that students who had a structured learning approach were more successful in retaining the vocabulary items taught in their classrooms than learners who had an unstructured approach.

The Japanese Context

Vocabulary learning strategies can be thought of as being context specific. In the Japanese case, students are usually passive and expect knowledge transfer from the teacher and are generally not autonomous learners. In a university setting the time spent in the EFL classroom is limited and there is little time to spend on vocabulary. From preliminary research it appears that Japanese university students sometimes study vocabulary out of class thus the use of vocabulary learning strategies can play a very important role in gaining success and learner autonomy for these students (Schmitt, 2000). Japanese students have a preference for rote-learning and it plays an important role in vocabulary learning strategies because rote-learning is defined as repetition, memorization, and practicing (Li, 2005). Japanese students and institutions still use a traditional learning style in which rote-learning strategy has been used especially when trying to retain vocabulary. Japanese university students are also strongly influenced by the rote-learning method since it is commonly used in schools for the purpose of English vocabulary and Japanese kanji character acquisition. In Japanese schools there has long been an educational culture of memorization. Japanese students have to copy

out and memorize thousands of written characters, a process which establishes rote-learning as a primary learning strategy. At the freshman university level, the learners engage in rote-learning independently. English tests such as the Eiken and the recently introduced TOEIC as a percentage of students English grades used at some universities in Japan, encourages this seemingly superficial word knowledge. Since the introduction of TOEIC scores as a percentage of students' English grades at some Japanese universities, a larger proportion of student time is often focused on trying to retain vocabulary. Teachers rarely, due to time constraints, have the time to assist students with vocabulary acquisition or give advice on employing vocabulary learning strategies. In Japanese universities, there are mainly two kinds of classes: communicative English classes where teachers teach listening and speaking and reading and writing classes including essay writing. There are no specific classes that focus on vocabulary or a place in the schedules of the above classes where teachers have occasion to spend time on vocabulary. In EFL environments in Japan, where there is minimal exposure to English in daily life, vocabulary acquisition does not come naturally, VLS strategy training is needed.

Conclusion

Although problems with defining and classifying vocabulary strategies are complex there should be a place for teachers to inform students of VLS and time for VLS strategy training. There are certain studies that show vocabulary learning strategies can help students. In Japan where there is minimal exposure to English in daily life and where word knowledge is often tested, teachers should be informing students about vocabulary learning strategies and students should be using them to their advantage.

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